

Cyberpsychology and the Virtual Self: Characteristics and Implications of Internet Use

Janet Powell

Introduction

The internet is rapidly becoming an integral component of modern daily life, facilitating the transfer of information and ideas across expansive geographic areas and changing the nature of communication worldwide. This new medium serves as a unique platform for the expression of the self, changing the way in which we define, create, and present our identities and engage our virtual selves in interpersonal behavior online. Drawing upon current research, this paper will focus on the psychological aspects of internet and the ways in which this new communication tool interfaces with our self and social psychologies.

The Self, Online

Prominent theorists in the field of identity psychology have held that there are many dimensions to the self. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, both Jung (1953) and Goffman (1959) recognized that individuals have a public self (persona) and a private, inner self where one's individuality resides. Rogers (1951) called this inner self our "true self," which is kept distinct from the "actual self" that we openly present in public.

In the virtual realm, Turkle (1995) contends that the internet can act as a virtual laboratory for trying out these different variations of "ourselves," offering a safe place to experiment with our potential identities, chief among these being our Rogerian "true self." Research by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) supports Turkle's hypotheses about self-expression on the internet. In a series of experiments, it was found that the "true self" concept is indeed more accessible in memory during

interactions over the internet while the “actual self” is more likely to be expressed in face-to-face interactions.

The implications for this aspect of self-expression are multi-fold. In this sense, the internet offers a unique opportunity in that individuals can remain relatively anonymous, thus feeling freer to behave in ways that may not be acceptable in one’s usual social sphere, a phenomenon similar to Rubin’s (1975) “strangers on a train” interaction. Further, self-disclosure is an essential component to relationship formation (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and it is through the expression of our “true selves” that bonds of empathy, compassion, and understanding are formed (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Those who are better able to express their “true” selves online tend to forge stronger bonds with virtual friends (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002).

In terms of self-presentation, Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that, at any given time, individuals possess several “possible selves” that become activated in different situations and at different stages of our lives. These “selves” stem from the complex, multiple self-schemas (coherent memories, feelings, and beliefs about ourselves that form an integrated whole) that each of us holds about ourselves (Markus, 1977). Goffman (1959) coined the term “impression management” to refer to the process by which we manipulate our multi-faceted selves, using “dress, words, and gestures to correspond to the impressions they are trying to make or the image they are trying to project.” Impression management techniques are influential in orchestrating our multiple selves, both offline and on.

The internet experience, therefore, has been defined as “a process by which a group of social actors in a given situation negotiate the meaning of the various situations which arise between them”

(Riva and Galimberti, 2001). On the internet, research has identified three basic dimensions that influence the process of impression management and creating the self online: (1) anonymity or identification; (2) synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous communication; and (3) textual or visual representation (Riva and Galimberti, 1998; Curtis, 1996). Our online self-presentation, or “strategic identity” is dependent on which of these conditions are present, and on whether or not we present our “true” self or a form of our “actual” self in accordance with our personality characteristics. Thus, the resultant online self-presentation is constructed, situational, dynamic, and context-dependent (Talamo and Ligorio, 2001).

It has been found that the “most important mediator of online activity is the purpose of the people who visit or inhabit it” (Riva and Galimberti, 2001). Research by Weiser (2001) led to the development of a theoretical model involving the functions of internet use and the dimensions of social integration online. Relying upon the Uses and Gratifications model of communication media, Weiser identified two primary areas of online activity: (1) Socio-Affective Regulation (social or affiliative internet use - “SAR”) and (2) Goods-and-Information-Acquisition (utilitarian or practical use - “GIA”). The author’s analysis of the effects of the internet upon psychological well-being found that those who use the internet mainly for SAR are more negatively affected by internet use (e.g., isolation from friends, family, and “real” community) while those who use the internet for GIA tend to be more favorably affected.

Regardless of how the internet is used, whether it be for business or for pleasure, one aspect of internet use is becoming clear: the internet is changing the nature of interpersonal relationships. As an example, research on emoticon use among males and females revealed a distinct behavioral change in

from the stereotyped “inexpressive male” (Wolf, 2000) to a male pattern of emotional expression that closely resembles female emoticon usage. It is as if this new form of media has so affected the “usual” social patterns to alter the culturally conditioned silence of men (Wolf, 2000).

Along with new ways of thinking about identity expression comes the optimism of a greater diversity of expression online. Notes Turkle (1995), “When identity was defined as unitary and solid it was relatively easy to censure deviations from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity... We do not feel compelled to rank and judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit.” In addition to gender constraints, this notion may be applied to the expression and greater acceptance of diversity of all kinds: racial, ethnic, and beyond.

Extending the realm of social acceptance is the emerging trend of altruism in the online community. One may recall the Kitty Genovese case from the 1960's which spawned a new area of social psychological research - that of prosocial behaviors. As Ms. Genovese was returning to her apartment late one night in New York City, she was brutally attacked with a knife. Her cries for help were heard by perhaps hundreds, and many watched the attack from their windows - yet no one came to her aid nor called the police. Nearly an hour passed before help arrived; meanwhile Ms. Genovese died. As the country was captivated by the Genovese case, psychologists were baffled by the “bystander effect” that kept witnesses from intervening.

Studies by Darley and Latane (1968) and others concluded that helping behavior is inhibited when we feel unattached from the victim; when the face-to-face aspect is absent; and when others are present (70% of subjects help if alone, only 12% help when others are present). Given these limitations

on helping behavior, it seems anomalous that helping behavior actually increases on the internet, where attachments to others are less accessible, where face-to-face interactions are absent, and a “place” populated with millions of users.

Wallace (1999) hypothesizes that helping online may be increased over similar “real” situations for several reasons. For one thing, the internet, with all of its virtual users, remains somewhat of a solitary experience, which may be likened to helping when alone versus when among a crowd where a “diffusion of responsibility” is more likely to exist. Also, we tend to help persons who are “like” us (Aronson, 1999) and may feel affiliations with online netizens like ourselves. Special Interest Groups and online communities may further unite similar “others.” Not all helping behavior may be completely altruistic, however, as psychologists debate whether internet helping, like offline helping, is primarily selfish as it brings rewards to the helper through increased self-esteem, gives the opportunity to demonstrate competence, is often associated with positive feedback/reinforcement, and can give the invigorating “Mother Teresa” effect (McClelland, 1983).

Psychological Implications of Internet Use

Recent research has begun to investigate the psychological and social effects of internet use, with mixed findings. Among the negative implications for internet use are various forms of psychopathology and the creation of new avenues of expression of these psychopathologies online.

In addition to disrupting genuine social and familial ties (Stoll, 1995) while acting as a major “time sink” (Wallace, 1999), isolation through high levels of internet use can lead to negative mental health consequences. A two-year study by Kraut, Patterson, and Lundmark (1998) found that high levels of internet use is associated with an increased risk of clinical depression. Similar results were

obtained in a study by Moody (2001) which found that high levels of internet use are associated with low levels of social loneliness and high levels of emotional loneliness whereas less internet use is associated with low levels of both social and emotional loneliness and improved psychological well-being.

Aside from the relationship to depression, high levels of internet use may be indicative of another psychopathological response: internet addiction. Briefly, internet addiction has been defined as “use of the internet that creates psychological, social, school and/or occupational difficulties in a person’s life” (Beard & Wolf, 2001). “Internet Addiction” as a pathological condition is slated to be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) for psychological disorders as an Axis I¹ disorder. (Refer to Appendix I for full diagnostic criteria.) The inclusion of internet addiction in the DSM began as a parody by psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg but has since been taken very seriously by researchers and clinicians alike (Grohol, 1998).

Rather than fitting the psychological profile of a chemical addiction, internet addiction more closely resembles an Impulse Control Disorder, with the internet merely serving as a vehicle for the expression of psychopathology (Wallace, 1999). Impulse Control Disorders are rooted in Skinner’s theory of operant conditioning and the influence of variable reinforcement (Wallace, 1999). As Skinner’s mice learned to click a bar to (occasionally) receive rewards, we click the mice (*computer mice, that is*) and (occasionally) get a good hit.

Maladaptive internet use has been found in every age, socioeconomic, and educational range.

¹Axis I disorders are reserved for clinical diagnoses as opposed to psychological disturbances due to medical conditions, personality disorders, or problems in social-environmental functioning.

Many of the internet addicts identified through extensive research by Young (1998) reported being depressed, lonely, having low self-esteem, and anxious. Applications that tend to be most attractive to potential addicts are two-way communications utilities, MUDs, news groups, and e-mail, as well as sexual addictions to internet porn (Orzack and Ross, 2000), with addicted users averaging almost 40 hours per week online. One quarter of these addicts reported becoming hooked within six months of use, with the majority being addicted within one year (Young, 1998). Such excessive internet use can lead to significant impairment in personal, social, and occupational functioning, and result in a harmful pattern of dependence on the internet.

In addition to the deleterious effects of internet addictions are the less well-known effects of Chronic Alternate World Disorder (CAWD). This disorder may be defined as “symptomatic behavior in which a person becomes fanatically engrossed in a virtual-reality (VR) world to the extent that he or she can no longer distinguish between the actual world and virtual reality” (Ichimura, Nakajima, and Juzoji, 2001). While a rare condition, persons who suffer from this disorder have gone on to commit serious, potentially devastating acts, such as the case in Japan where an airline was hijacked and the captain was killed by a person suffering from CAWD (Ichimura, Nakajima, and Juzoji, 2001).

CAWD is frequently associated with playing VR games over extended periods of time, and is often comorbid with other psychiatric conditions, particularly schizophrenia and personality disorders. While still a very new diagnosis, it is expected that this disorder will increase in prevalence as computer graphics become more engrossing and realistic in appearance and as online involvement with captivating applications such as role playing games become more popular (Medline, 2001).

While discussing the topic of psychopathology and internet applications, the growing practice of

human service delivery online should be mentioned. Among services commonly offered are information resource and referral services, advocacy, community education, and online psychotherapy. These applications have been widely used, as it has been estimated that over 30 million people rely on such services each year (Green and Himelstein, 1998). Internet applications can be useful in reaching populations that may not otherwise receive care, such of those facing geographic or situational isolation, and those with conditions such as panic disorder and agoraphobia that make conventional face-to-face counseling difficult (Giuseppe, 2002).

According to the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO), the use of the internet for psychotherapy has resulted in the creation of many new intervention strategies. Further, online counseling can be successfully implemented as the primary treatment modality or in combination with traditional face-to-face office practice (ISMHO, 2002). Since their establishment in 1997, this group has formulated a number of guidelines that clinicians may use to evaluate clients for online counseling. Suitability refers to “the person’s preferences regarding online therapy, how suggestible the person is within a particular communication modality, his or her skills in communicating within that modality, and the potentially therapeutic aspects of that modality for the person” (Suler, 2001).

In addition to suitability, other factors influencing the feasibility of online treatment include client’s proficiency in internet applications, client’s willingness to try new forms of communication, and the security and privacy of the client’s computer (Suler, 2001). While online therapy may not be appropriate for all clients in all situations, this new mode of treatment offers great promise for the future.

Conclusion

By the glow of her monitor late at night, the internet brings life into Irena's² tiny North Lexington apartment. Irena whizzes around the globe to her homeland, Russia, listening to the local news, communicating with family and friends left behind, and experiencing a bittersweet connection with her former life. A refugee, Jewish by ethnicity only, Irena uses the internet to learn about the religion of her ancestors, using an online English dictionary when necessary. Never having the freedom to know about spiritual issues before coming to America, Irena reads the Bible, is interested in the life of Christ, and admires the teachings of the Dalai Lama. Armed with the internet at age 54, Irena is immersed in discovering herself, anew.

For better or for worse, the introduction of the internet into our daily lives is impacting the ways in which we spend our time, express ourselves, communicate, and relate to the world. This new communication technology is yet in its infancy, and much more research must be done to reveal the intricacies and implications of this powerful new tool. Those who are fortunate enough to be on the “wired” side of the digital divide are co-evolving day by day with their brains, online. We have both the power and the responsibility to shape the internet into a medium that brings out the best in humanity, enhancing and improving our lives well into the future.

² In accordance with the Code of Ethics for the National Association of Social Workers, name has been changed to protect privacy.

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Appendix I

PROPOSED INTERNET ADDICTION DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA (Beard & Wolf, 2001)

All of the following must be present:

1. Is preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session).
2. Needs to use the Internet with increased amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction.
3. Has made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use.
4. Is restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use.
5. Has stayed online longer than originally intended.

At least one of the following:

1. Has jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet.
2. Has lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet.
3. Uses the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression).